

Border Crossings¹

Two incidents in my first parish come as close as I can discern to be the sources of my thoughts this morning.

First incident: I delivered groceries to a hard-living family in the early evening hours way back in the 1970's. What makes this particular delivery different from others was that I had my dad with me. This was my "take your father to work" day. Anyway, as we juggled the grocery bags, I was wondering what he was thinking. What did he think of how I talked with the couple? What did he think of the dingy, darkened apartment? What did he think of the boyfriend who sat in front of a television set without acknowledging our presence? You see, poverty as I grew up was something over there and had to do with people that were different from us. Having dad along made vivid that I was venturing into situations that were disconnected with my family and growing up experiences.

A second similar incident: About 2 or 3 years into my first situation, the phone rang at 4:00 a.m. and a hysterical voice announced that there had been a shooting next door and could I come right away. My father-in-law was visiting and—owing to the fact that I was still in my 20's offered to come along. I remember that he stopped and stood in the glow of flashing blue police car lights on the sidewalk in front of the

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 20, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

house where the crime—a contract murder as it turned out—had taken place. It was my job to go into the house and try to help.

Back then, it began to dawn on me that there is something about being a Christian that requires us to venture into situations we would never enter if we were not disciples.

I'm not just talking about the interesting and difficult situations to which a pastor is exposed. I look at you as you get involved in church life. Someone spoke of her mission trip as one of the highlights of her life. She said, "I looked out of the unscreened bathroom window to chickens and fields and thought, 'What in the world am I doing here?'" Or Stephen ministers sit down and talk with their distressed "care receivers:" as they are called. In those tender conversations social niceties and appearances fall down and suddenly the layperson is getting a rich look at what life is really like for another struggling human being. To be in that place is to stand on holy ground. Few people get to experience that. And now you who have volunteered to be trained and reach out as a Stephen Minister are in that place.

To be a follower of Jesus is to find oneself thrust into or beckoned into places and circumstances that they may never have otherwise experienced.

There's a principle at work in what I'm talking about. To be a Christian is to become a co-worker with Jesus in God's mission to the whole of the world. You see, God ultimately intends to establish his reign of love throughout the whole creation. This includes all peoples, all cultures, all religions, and all social classes. Christian faith—as opposed to other groups—is thoroughly cross-cultural. Most religions are captivated by the society they started in. Hindus and Confucianists are deeply associated with India or China respectively. That means that it doesn't advance the interests of any one group—say Europeans or the middle class, or men. Christianity embraces all sorts and conditions of humanity. And someday Christ will unite all people. So the mission that God has begun extends to all people.

This suddenly makes sense out of several stories in the Bible. Abraham is going to be the founding father of God's people. Notice he will do this in a foreign land among foreign people—Canaan.

The prophet, Jonah, isn't interested in venturing into traditionally hostile territory—Assyria with its capital city, Nineveh. But God forcibly gets Jonah there via the whale.

Jacob's son, Joseph, is carried off to Egypt as a slave. Normally, you might think that such an exile would be a catastrophe for Joseph. But it turns out that the Pharaoh's

dungeon is precisely where God can triumph. Daniel and Nehemiah are in similar situations. The Apostle Paul is a tireless traveler.

Someone says, well, Jesus didn't cross a lot of borders. That's a true statement. But Jesus crossed social boundaries. Jesus was forever consorting with the wrong kinds of people—sinners. To fraternize with a sinner was the social equivalent of ministering to Gentiles.

Put bluntly, crossing borders is what Christians do. There's something about our faith that is always taking us where we would least expect to be. Listen to the Reformer, Martin Luther on boundaries:

Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evil doers and mockers. For this cause he came, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So, the Christian too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. He who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ. He wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people.

Now, what I'm saying goes against—or seems to go against—what our mothers teach us. You're known by the company you keep. Dolly Parton sang a song about it.

You say you're doin nothing wrong
I don't believe you are.
I'm only trying to help you sis
Before you go too far
Cause I think you're an angel
But folks think you're cheap.
Cause you're known by the company you keep

Actually, this very principle proved a big problem for Jesus. His dining with notorious sinners and the wrong kinds of women made him into a lightning rod for criticism. Let's admit it, the values of our friends and working peers have a way of shaping us.

The reverse is also true. I think of how the OT character Joseph didn't become like the Egyptians. His friendship with the Pharaoh and his interpretation of the pharaoh's dreams lifted the whole of Egyptian society.

As Alexander Mackay, the great Presbyterian leader used to say: The life of the church is found not in the strongholds of the church but on the frontier. It's all along that interface or at the contact points between people of faith and people of unbelief that Jesus Christ encounters and saves the world.

This all makes me wonder how I might be called or urged to cross some border—maybe one I'm not allowed to cross into some place that I supposedly don't belong. I'd lift up the same question for you. Where might custom, habit, or outright social pressure be keeping you away? What line are you being told, or are telling yourself, that you ought not to cross? You befriend a notorious atheist or political extremist. You visit a very different church. You take up a hobby that doesn't seem compatible with your dignity or your resume. Maybe you take up slot car racing, jazz ensemble playing, the tango, or whatever

interests you. You make friends with someone who is genuinely different—different social class, language, personal background, philosophy of life. You travel to unusual places. Bulgaria, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic. You read offbeat. What are the extreme progressives writing? How about the libertarians?

I'm trying to think of all kinds of boundaries that shape our coming and going, that one day will be broken down. That's right. As Christians, our vision is for a glorious reunion of all people under the glorious lordship of Jesus Christ. Every knee shall bow—so the Bible teaches—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the father.

Ours is a faith that goes out. Jesus isn't captive to any group. We find him vital and alive in the friendship that we think we shouldn't have. And it starts when you and I step across a line.